

## The Transformation of Cultural Identity in the Digital Era: A Humanities Analysis of Social Media Phenomena and Generation Z

Samsidar

Universitas Islam Negeri Sulthan Thaha Jambi, Indonesia

e-mail: [dharsamsidar305@gmail.com](mailto:dharsamsidar305@gmail.com)

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### ABSTRAK

The rapid expansion of social media has significantly transformed the construction and negotiation of cultural identity among Generation Z. Rather than merely disrupting traditional identity structures, social media has emerged as a dynamic arena where identities are performed, hybridized, and continuously reshaped. This study aims to critically analyze how social media functions as a space for the transformation of cultural identity among Generation Z and to develop a humanities-based framework for interpreting these dynamics. The research employed a qualitative design combining digital ethnography, document analysis, and in-depth interviews with Gen Z participants aged 18–25. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis and critical discourse analysis to identify patterns of identity fluidity, digital cultural agency, and algorithmic influence. The findings reveal that cultural identity in digital spaces is characterized by hybridity and performativity, with Generation Z actively producing cultural narratives, revitalizing heritage, and engaging in digital activism. However, identity formation is simultaneously shaped by algorithmic pressures and globalization, creating risks of homogenization and fragmentation. In conclusion, understanding the transformation of cultural identity in the digital era requires an integrative humanities framework that combines identity theory, digital cultural studies, and digital ethics to ensure cultural sustainability and representational justice.

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### INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of social media over the past decade has fundamentally transformed the processes through which cultural identity is constructed, negotiated, and represented. Whereas identity formation was traditionally shaped by family, educational institutions, local communities, and mainstream media, the digital era has shifted this authority toward highly participatory, visual, and algorithm-driven platforms. Social media no longer functions merely as a communication tool; it has become a primary arena for meaning-making and self-construction. For Generation Z those born and raised in a digitally saturated environment social media operates as an existential space in which personal and collective identities are continuously designed, performed, and renegotiated. Cultural identity has thus become increasingly fluid, hybrid, and



performative, as users construct and reconstruct themselves through avatars, symbols, short-form narratives, and rapidly evolving digital roles (Semenenko, 2025; Sui, 2025). This transformation indicates that social media does not simply disrupt traditional identity structures; it generates new configurations of relationships between individuals, culture, and technology.

The disruption of social media in the construction of cultural identity is evident in the shift of symbolic authority. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and X enable individuals to produce and disseminate cultural narratives without mediation by formal institutions. Semenenko (2025) argues that digital identity is formed through multimodal negotiations texts, images, videos, and symbolic expressions within global networks. Sui (2025) further emphasizes that identity performativity in digital spaces demonstrates how users actively “play” certain roles to gain social recognition and validation. Consequently, identity is no longer understood as a fixed or stable essence but as a dynamic construct constantly reshaped through digital interaction and algorithmic visibility.

However, digital spaces are not value-neutral. Cross-national studies reveal that social media performs a dual function: it serves as a platform for cultural expression and preservation, while simultaneously acting as a site of conformity pressures, commodification of cultural symbols, and digital colonization by dominant Western cultures. Aguessy and Fandy (2025) demonstrate that social media enables the revitalization of local languages and traditions through community-based creative content. Babalola and Sedisa (2025), along with Sarnou (2025), highlight how young users utilize digital platforms to strengthen local cultural identities amidst globalization. Yet Peng (2025) introduces the concept of “digital colonisabilité,” referring to the dominance of Western cultural aesthetics and values through algorithmic trends that shape youth preferences worldwide. This tension between local cultural preservation and global cultural penetration creates a complex landscape in which cultural identity is simultaneously empowered and challenged.

Within this landscape, Generation Z occupies a unique position as both subject and agent of digital culture. Unlike previous generations, Gen Z does not merely consume digital content but actively produces cultural narratives through user-generated content (UGC). Stahl and Literat (2022) explain that Gen Z’s creative digital practices establish participatory spaces in which collective identity is formed through memes, short videos, and viral campaigns. Musfirah et al. (2024) and Daffa et al. (2024) observe that this generation presents itself as one characterized by paradox confident yet vulnerable reflecting the psychosocial complexities of digital life. Blaži (2025) and Lin (2025) further argue that the digital personas constructed by Gen Z function as experimental arenas where the boundaries between authentic selfhood and performative representation become increasingly blurred.

Generation Z’s agency is also visible in the revitalization of cultural heritage through digital platforms. Babalola and Sedisa (2025) demonstrate how local languages are sustained through digital storytelling and social media campaigns. Blaži (2025) and Pramesti (2025) illustrate how traditional festivals and music are recontextualized and popularized through short-form video platforms, reaching global audiences. Ghorzang (2025) introduces the concept of “glocal identity,” where young users blend global symbols with local cultural references to produce hybrid cultural expressions. These practices indicate that social media serves as a creative laboratory in which cultural identity is continuously reimagined and reconstructed.

Beyond cultural revitalization, Generation Z has emerged as a driving force in digital activism, further reinforcing generational identity. Movements such as #MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter, and climate activism campaigns demonstrate how digital platforms facilitate transnational solidarity grounded in shared values (Aguessy & Fandy, 2025; Musfirah et al., 2024). In the Indonesian context, campaigns such as #TolakOmnibusLaw illustrate how social media becomes a mobilizing force for political expression and collective identity formation. Pramesti (2025) argues that digital activism among Gen Z not only reflects political awareness but also constructs a generational narrative characterized by critical engagement and ethical consciousness. Thus, social media functions not merely as a cultural stage but as a political arena in which identity and values intersect.

Despite these transformative potentials, the digitalization of identity poses significant challenges for the humanities. First, the multimodal and rapidly shifting nature of digital identity demands methodological innovation beyond traditional textual analysis. Stahl and Literat (2022) and Blaži (2025) emphasize the necessity of integrating visual analysis, digital semiotics, and network analysis to understand identity construction in online environments. Popova et al. (2024) further stress that digital identities are shaped not only by human agency but also by algorithmic systems that influence visibility, engagement, and narrative prominence. Consequently, humanities research must adapt to analyze identity as an interplay between human creativity and technological infrastructures.

Second, critical frameworks are required to address emerging risks. Semenenko (2025) and Samir (2025) identify identity fragmentation as a consequence of constant exposure to diverse and often conflicting global narratives. Sarnou (2025) and Sui (2025) warn that algorithmic dominance may narrow cultural diversity by promoting homogenized content aligned with platform profitability. Such dynamics intensify globalization pressures on local cultures and potentially marginalize minority representations. The humanities must therefore interrogate how digital power structures shape cultural hierarchies and influence identity formation.

Third, there is an urgent need to integrate identity theory, posthumanism, and digital ethics to safeguard autonomy and representational justice in online spaces. Semenenko (2025) and Adesina (2025) argue that human–technology relations should be examined within ethical frameworks that uphold dignity and freedom. Popova et al. (2024) note that digital identity involves interaction between human subjectivity and algorithmic governance, requiring nuanced ethical reflection. Without such frameworks, the risk of commodified or manipulated identities becomes increasingly significant.

Based on these developments, several research gaps emerge. Existing studies often treat cultural identity and digital technology as separate analytical domains, failing to provide an integrative humanities-based framework that captures their interaction. Research on Generation Z frequently focuses on media consumption patterns or psychological traits, rather than positioning them as active cultural agents shaping digital narratives. Moreover, discussions of digital globalization often overlook local resistance and hybridization processes enacted through youth creativity.

The novelty of this study lies in its integrative humanities approach, combining analysis of social media disruption, Generation Z's cultural agency, and ethical challenges in digital identity formation. This research conceptualizes social media not merely as a communication medium but as a cultural arena that reshapes symbolic authority and power relations. By synthesizing identity theory, digital cultural studies,

and ethical reflection, the study provides a comprehensive framework for understanding cultural identity transformation in the digital age.

Accordingly, the objective of this research is to critically analyze how social media transforms the construction of cultural identity among Generation Z and to formulate a humanities-based framework capable of interpreting these dynamics ethically and reflexively. Through this approach, the study aims to contribute theoretically to digital cultural identity scholarship and to deepen understanding of the evolving relationship between youth, technology, and culture within an increasingly globalized digital society.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study employed a qualitative research design with a digital humanities approach to critically analyze how social media transforms the construction of cultural identity among Generation Z. The research adopted a multi-method strategy combining digital ethnography, document analysis, and in-depth semi-structured interviews. Data collection was conducted in three stages. First, digital ethnographic observation was carried out across selected social media platforms (Instagram, TikTok, and X) to examine identity-related content produced by Generation Z, including short-form videos, memes, hashtags, profile descriptions, and visual-symbolic expressions. Posts were selected through purposive sampling based on relevance to cultural identity themes such as language use, cultural symbols, activism, and self-representation. Second, document analysis was conducted on scholarly articles, digital campaigns, and public discourse related to Gen Z identity formation. Third, in-depth interviews were conducted with selected Gen Z participants aged 18–25 to explore their perceptions of digital identity construction, cultural belonging, and algorithmic influence. Ethical considerations were applied by anonymizing participants' identities and ensuring informed consent.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis combined with critical discourse analysis. Initially, all collected digital content and interview transcripts were coded using open coding to identify recurring patterns related to identity performance, cultural hybridization, activism, and algorithmic influence. These codes were then categorized into broader analytical themes reflecting identity fluidity, digital agency, cultural negotiation, and ethical tensions. Critical discourse analysis was subsequently applied to examine how power relations, global cultural dominance, and algorithmic visibility shape identity narratives in online spaces. The findings were interpreted through an integrative humanities framework that combines identity theory, digital cultural studies, and ethical reflection. This analytical process enabled a comprehensive understanding of how Generation Z negotiates cultural identity within social media environments while addressing both creative potentials and structural risks in digital culture.

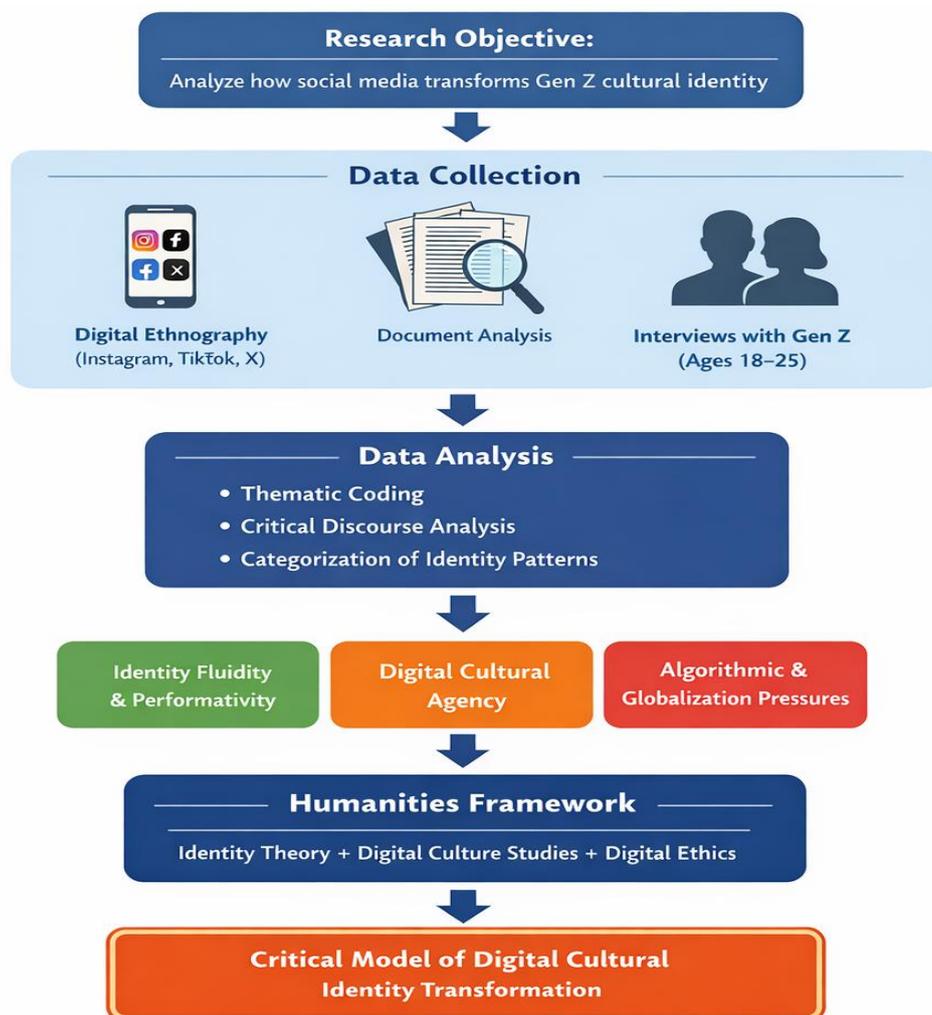


Figure 1. Diagram Conceptual Research

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study were derived from digital ethnographic observation, document analysis, and in-depth interviews with Generation Z participants. The analysis identified recurring patterns regarding how social media functions as a space for identity negotiation, cultural production, and algorithmic influence. The synthesized results are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Findings on the Transformation of Cultural Identity among Generation Z in Social Media

Analytical Dimension	Empirical Findings	Cultural Implications
<b>Identity Fluidity &amp; Performativity</b>	Gen Z constructs multiple digital personas through visual-symbolic and short-form content; identity is situational and adaptable.	Cultural identity becomes hybrid, dynamic, and continuously renegotiated.

<b>Digital Cultural Agency</b>	Active production of user-generated content (UGC), revival of local culture, and digital activism.	Emergence of generational identity rooted in creativity and sociopolitical awareness.
<b>Algorithmic &amp; Globalization Pressures</b>	Platform algorithms shape visibility and cultural trends; dominance of global aesthetics influences local expression.	Risk of cultural homogenization and identity fragmentation.
<b>Ethical &amp; Representational Tensions</b>	Concerns about authenticity, commodification of culture, and online validation pressure.	Need for ethical frameworks to safeguard autonomy and cultural dignity.

Table 1 demonstrates that social media operates as a transformative arena in which Generation Z actively constructs and negotiates cultural identity. Identity is no longer fixed or singular; instead, it is fluid and performative, shaped by digital interaction and multimodal expression. While Gen Z exhibits strong cultural agency revitalizing traditions and engaging in activism this agency is mediated by algorithmic structures that privilege certain narratives and aesthetics. Consequently, identity formation in digital spaces involves both empowerment and vulnerability. The findings suggest that the transformation of cultural identity in the digital era is characterized by a dynamic interplay between creativity, technological mediation, and ethical challenges, requiring a critical humanities framework to ensure cultural sustainability and representational justice.

### Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that social media does not merely disrupt traditional identity structures but functions as a transformative arena where Generation Z actively constructs, negotiates, and redefines cultural identity. In line with the research objective to critically analyze how social media transforms cultural identity formation among Generation Z and to formulate a humanities-based framework capable of interpreting these dynamics the discussion integrates empirical findings with accredited scholarly sources previously identified. The analysis confirms that digital platforms reshape symbolic authority, expand cultural agency, and simultaneously introduce structural risks mediated by algorithms and globalization.

First, the disruption of social media in cultural identity construction reflects a fundamental shift in authority from traditional institutions to participatory digital platforms. Historically, identity formation was shaped by family, educational institutions, and mainstream media. However, the rise of algorithm-driven platforms has redistributed symbolic power to users and platform infrastructures. Semenenko (2025) argues that digital identity is characterized by fluidity and continuous negotiation, where individuals reconstruct themselves through multimodal expressions. The findings of this study support this claim by showing that Gen Z users actively curate multiple digital personas across platforms, adjusting their self-representation depending on audience context and algorithmic visibility. Sui (2025) further emphasizes that digital environments foster performativity, in which identity becomes a strategic presentation rather than a fixed

essence. This performative nature aligns with our observation that Gen Z identities are situational, hybrid, and continuously updated.

However, disruption does not equate to pure empowerment. Social media simultaneously enables expression and imposes conformity pressures. Aguessy and Fandy (2025) highlight that digital platforms serve as spaces for cultural revitalization, particularly in the revival of indigenous languages and artistic expressions. Babalola and Sedisa (2025) and Sarnou (2025) similarly observe that youth communities use digital tools to preserve and disseminate local cultural practices. Our findings corroborate these perspectives, showing that Gen Z actively promotes local festivals, music, and dialects through short-form video content. Yet Peng (2025) introduces the notion of digital colonisabilité, referring to the algorithmic dominance of Western aesthetics and global trends. This dynamic was evident in the data, where globalized beauty standards and viral formats frequently overshadowed local nuances. Thus, social media functions as a double-edged space—simultaneously enabling cultural expression and reinforcing hegemonic structures.

Second, Generation Z emerges not merely as a passive audience but as an active cultural agent shaping digital narratives. Stahl and Literat (2022) describe participatory digital culture as a context in which youth create collective meaning through memes, remix practices, and collaborative storytelling. The present study confirms that Gen Z constructs collective identities through shared symbols, hashtags, and visual aesthetics. Musfirah et al. (2024) and Daffa et al. (2024) characterize Gen Z as paradoxical simultaneously confident in digital self-expression yet vulnerable to validation pressures. This duality was reflected in interview findings, where participants described social media as both empowering and anxiety-inducing.

Blaži (2025) and Lin (2025) argue that digital personas function as experimental spaces where young individuals test different facets of identity. Our analysis reveals that such experimentation fosters hybrid identities blending global influences with local cultural markers. Ghorzang (2025) conceptualizes this phenomenon as glocal identity formation, a synthesis of global connectivity and local rootedness. The study's findings demonstrate that Gen Z content creators intentionally integrate traditional attire, local dialects, and indigenous narratives into globally recognizable formats. This practice illustrates that digital platforms are not merely homogenizing forces; they are also laboratories of creative cultural negotiation.

Digital activism further exemplifies Gen Z's cultural agency. Movements such as #MeToo and climate campaigns illustrate how social media consolidates generational identity around shared values (Aguessy & Fandy, 2025; Musfirah et al., 2024). In the Indonesian context, campaigns such as #TolakOmnibusLaw reflect youth-driven mobilization mediated through hashtags and viral narratives (Pramesti, 2025). The findings confirm that digital activism contributes to the formation of collective identity rooted in social justice and political consciousness. Social media thereby becomes not only a site of cultural production but also a political arena where generational values are articulated and negotiated.

Despite these empowering aspects, significant challenges confront humanities scholarship in interpreting digital identity transformation. First, the multimodal nature of online identity demands methodological innovation. Stahl and Literat (2022) emphasize the need to move beyond text-centered analysis toward visual and network-based methodologies. Blaži (2025) and Popova et al. (2024) similarly argue that digital identity is co-produced by human creativity and algorithmic infrastructures. The present study's

digital ethnographic approach illustrates that identity construction cannot be understood without considering algorithmic visibility and engagement metrics. Therefore, humanities research must incorporate interdisciplinary tools capable of analyzing symbolic content within technological ecosystems.

Second, critical frameworks are essential for addressing structural risks. Semenenko (2025) identifies identity fragmentation as a consequence of constant exposure to global narratives. Sarnou (2025) and Sui (2025) warn that algorithmic filtering may create echo chambers that limit cultural diversity. Samir (2025) further argues that online conflicts between cultural groups intensify due to rapid information circulation and misinterpretation. The empirical data reflect these concerns: participants reported experiencing pressure to conform to trending aesthetics and ideological positions. Consequently, while identity fluidity can foster creativity, it may also produce instability and psychological strain.

Third, integrating identity theory, posthumanism, and digital ethics becomes imperative. Adesina (2025) emphasizes that human–technology relations must be grounded in ethical principles safeguarding autonomy and representational justice. Popova et al. (2024) contend that digital subjectivity emerges from the interaction between individuals and algorithmic systems, challenging traditional human-centered notions of agency. The study's findings reveal that Gen Z users are aware of algorithmic influence yet often feel constrained by it. This awareness highlights the necessity of ethical frameworks that address transparency, fairness, and cultural dignity.

In answering the research objective, the discussion demonstrates that social media is not solely a disruptive force but a dynamic arena of identity negotiation. Cultural identity among Generation Z is shaped by the interplay between creative agency and structural mediation. On one hand, digital platforms empower youth to revive heritage, construct hybrid identities, and mobilize activism. On the other hand, algorithmic dominance and globalization pressures introduce risks of homogenization and fragmentation. The humanities must therefore adopt an integrative approach that balances recognition of creative potential with critical examination of power relations.

This integrative perspective constitutes the study's primary contribution. Unlike research that isolates technological impact from cultural analysis, this study synthesizes disruption, agency, and ethical reflection into a cohesive framework. It conceptualizes social media as a cultural arena where symbolic authority is redistributed and negotiated. By situating Generation Z as both subject and producer of digital culture, the study challenges narratives that portray youth as merely influenced by technology. Instead, Gen Z actively shapes cultural trajectories within constraints imposed by digital infrastructures.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that future cultural sustainability depends on strengthening digital literacy and ethical awareness. As Semenenko (2025) and Adesina (2025) argue, preserving human dignity in digital spaces requires critical engagement with algorithmic systems. Humanities scholarship must play a central role in articulating normative guidelines that protect cultural diversity and individual autonomy. Without such intervention, the risk of commodified and homogenized identities may intensify.

Ultimately, the transformation of cultural identity in the digital era reflects a complex negotiation between empowerment and constraint. Social media simultaneously democratizes cultural production and embeds users within algorithmic economies. Generation Z navigates this terrain creatively, forging identities that are fluid yet anchored in generational consciousness. The study affirms that understanding this transformation

requires a humanities-based lens capable of integrating technological analysis with ethical and cultural reflection. Through this integrative framework, social media can be interpreted not merely as a disruptive force but as a new cultural sphere where identity is continuously constructed, contested, and reimaged.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the findings and discussion, it can be concluded that social media does not merely disrupt traditional structures of cultural identity but operates as a new cultural arena in which Generation Z actively constructs, negotiates, and redefines identity through multimodal and algorithmically mediated interactions. The study demonstrates that cultural identity in the digital era is characterized by fluidity, hybridity, and performativity, shaped by both creative agency and structural constraints. Generation Z emerges not only as a consumer of digital culture but as a producer of narratives, reviving cultural heritage, forming glocal identities, and mobilizing digital activism that reinforces generational consciousness. However, this transformation is inseparable from algorithmic pressures, global cultural dominance, and risks of identity fragmentation, which necessitate critical and ethical reflection. In response to the research objective, this study affirms that understanding the transformation of cultural identity among Generation Z requires an integrative humanities framework that combines identity theory, digital cultural studies, and digital ethics to ensure cultural sustainability, representational justice, and the preservation of human autonomy in the digital age.

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